

Press Conference on the Effort to Rebuild High Knob Tower

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July 9, 2010

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Coeburn, Virginia

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I am pleased to join you in Coeburn this afternoon to update you on the significant progress that has been made in advancing the reconstruction of the Observation Tower at High Knob and announce a public meeting that will be held on July 19 at 6:00 PM to provide the area's residents with an opportunity to provide comment on proposed new designs.

For many years, all of us here today have recognized the outstanding opportunity that High Knob presents our region, and it is my goal that High Knob becomes a major tourist destination for visitors who are seeking a premier outdoor experience.

The High Knob Observation tower was destroyed by fire in the fall of 2007, and its destruction represented a great loss for the history and heritage of our region. Generations of families have gathered at the Tower, marriage proposals have been made there and weddings performed. Visited by 5,000 people each year, the Tower was a focal point for the High Knob region. With its unparalleled view of five states within a 100 mile radius, the Tower was the highest point in the entire Clinch Ranger District.

In the weeks following the Tower's destruction, I assembled a meeting of interested local residents, representatives of the U.S. Forest Service, local government leaders and other interested stakeholders to develop a strategy for rebuilding the Observation Tower and developing other facilities in the High Knob area which would enable the site to realize its full tourism potential.

From our initial meeting, the High Knob Enhancement Corporation has been developed and has undertaken a very successful effort to advance the reconstruction of the tower. The fundraising campaign of the High Knob Enhancement Corporation has secured more than \$130,000 in donations from more than 600 individuals, private companies and local governments.

Last year, we made another significant step toward rebuilding the tower when at my urging and that of Delegate Terry Kilgore, who represents the High Knob Area in the Virginia General Assembly, a federal Transportation Enhancement grant of \$280,000 has been awarded to assist with the Tower reconstruction. The estimated cost to rebuild the Tower is nearly \$600,000, and I am working with local officials to secure the additional funds necessary to complete this project. The High Knob Enhancement Corporation is in turn continuing their successful fundraising efforts.

I am pleased to announce today that we are now ready to move forward with choosing a design for a new tower at High Knob. In the year since we have gathered for the federal funding announcement, Hill Studios, which is based in Roanoke, with the assistance of Thompson and Litton, in Wise, has been engaged to prepare proposals for the design work.

Today I would like to invite Southwest Virginia residents interested in the Tower's reconstruction to attend a public meeting on Monday, July 19 at 6 PM at the Norton Community Center. The public meeting will provide a time for interested individuals to offer comments on at least three design concepts, which will be on display. During the meeting, a presentation will be made explaining each design, and then individuals in attendance will have the opportunity to offer suggestions and comments on the designs.

After the comments are reviewed, the design will be chosen and engineering work will be completed later this year. Construction on the new tower is expected to begin in the spring of

2011.

The new tower will be built to offer the unparalleled view of five states and a 100 mile radius offered by the original tower. The U.S. Forest Service will own and operate the tower, which will be constructed of durable, fire-resistant materials and will be designed to require minimal maintenance.

The High Knob area is truly one of our region's most valuable assets, and rebuilding the Observation Tower will assist in drawing many more visitors to the region. I would also like to note that we are making great progress in the broader effort to boost the High Knob area. In the Spring of 2008, I joined with some of you here today to break ground on the construction of a new network of horse trails at High Knob, improvements to existing trails and the installation of new parking areas and restrooms to facilitate access to the trails. This construction, with the benefit of \$600,000 in federal funds approved by Congress at my request, is well underway.

As part of that project, a new parking area has been constructed at Little Stoney Falls in Wise County, and a new parking area at McGhee Creek in Scott County is nearing completion. Construction has begun on a parking area in Wise County near the Observation Tower site. Four miles of trails are now being upgraded, including the installation of new stream crossings and culverts, along old Route 619. In addition, in the near future three new miles of trails will be constructed and new restroom facilities will be installed. These improvements will enable more horse enthusiasts from across the region to more easily access the trails and enjoy a better trail-riding experience.

Additionally, a series of improvements to the Chief Benge Scout Trail is now nearing completion. The 24 mile trail extends from High Knob to Little Stoney Falls in Scott County and is available for use by hikers, bicyclists and horseback riders and will soon connect with the new horse trails. The trail had become degraded due to severe erosion, and with the benefit of a Federal Highway Administration grant provided through the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's Recreational Trails Fund, the trail is now being repaired and will soon provide an outstanding opportunity for outdoor enthusiasts.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize a number of individuals who have been instrumental to the efforts to rebuild the High Knob Observation Tower and to the broader effort to boost tourism in the High Knob area.

Lu Ellsworth, Chairman of the High Knob Enhancement Corporation, deserves our thanks today along with the other members of the Corporation for their hard work to advance the effort to rebuild the High Knob Tower. Rita McReynolds, Chair of the Corporation's Finance Committee, and Robby Robbins, who serves on the Wise County Board of Supervisors and serves as Chair of the Corporation's Design Committee, should also be recognized today for their outstanding work on behalf of this project.

I would also like to thank Skip Skinner, Executive Director, and Duane Miller, Deputy Director, of the LENOWISCO Planning District Commission for their continued commitment to enhancing our region's tourism economy.

I also want to thank Delegate Terry Kilgore for his continued efforts on behalf of the region and for his dedication to advancing the High Knob area.

I want to offer my thanks to Maureen Hyzer, Forest Supervisor for the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest and Jorge Hershel, Clinch District Ranger, for their assistance on behalf of the effort to rebuild the High Knob tower.

Finally, I would like to thank my Project Manager, Derek Lyall, for his persistent and persuasive efforts on behalf of this project.

With the improvements to High Knob, it is my hope that many more visitors will take advantage of the many recreational offerings the region affords. Increased visitation to the High Knob area will encourage small business growth in Coeburn, Dungannon, Big Stone Gap and Norton, providing new economic opportunities for local residents. I encourage all interested residents to attend the meeting on July 19 to offer suggestions on the design of the new tower.